

Conclusions of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development (RFSD)

held as a special informal segment of the 84th meeting of the UNECE Executive Committee
Tuesday, 10 May 2016, 10:00 to 13:00
Salle XI, Palais des Nations, Geneva

Background

1. Following the invitation to the UN Regional Commissions by the General Assembly to contribute to the work of the High-level Political Forum, including through annual regional meetings¹, and the call of the 2030 Agenda for strong follow-up and review mechanisms at national, regional and global levels, UNECE member States had engaged in a series of informal consultations to determine the modalities of the 2016 Regional Forum on Sustainable Development. Taking into account the ongoing global negotiations on the overall follow-up and review architecture for the 2030 Agenda, and not wanting to pre-empt the outcomes of these negotiations, member States decided to hold the 2016 Regional Forum as a special informal segment of EXCOM in the morning of 10 May 2016.
2. A meeting of the moderator with non-state actors, which was also attended by interested government delegations, took place before the beginning of the Regional Forum on the same day.
3. The Regional Forum was attended by experts and representatives of governments, as well as observers from civil society² and international organizations. Regional Directors and other representatives of 19 UN system entities were in attendance.³ Key messages from civil society and the private sector were addressed to the Regional Forum by invited speakers. Civil society had coordinated and submitted a position paper relating to the themes of the Regional Forum.⁴
4. The meeting was preceded by a Regional Expert Group Meeting (EGM) for the preparation of voluntary reviews at the 2016 HLPF for the nine volunteering countries from the UNECE region, organized by UNDESA in collaboration with UNECE on 9 May, and followed by a two-day meeting of the Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) and the Regional UNDG Team for Europe and Central Asia (R-UNDG).
5. Together the four back-to-back meetings formed a “2030 Sustainable Development Week” in the UNECE region.

¹ A/RES/67/290, para. 13.

² Association for Sustainable Human Development, International Trade Union Confederation, European ECO-Forum, European Environmental Bureau, European Youth Forum and Centre for Socio-Economic Development, Forum of Women's NGOs of Kyrgyzstan, NGO Mama-86, Rutgers WPF, Women in Europe for a Common Future International, World Vision International, WWF International.

³ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Atomic Energy Agency, International Labour Organization, International Trade Centre, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Regional United Nations Development Group, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations Human Settlements Programme, United Nations Industrial Development Organization, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations World Tourism Organization, World Health Organization, World Intellectual Property Organization.

⁴ EXCOM informal document 2016/31.

Regional Forum on Sustainable Development

6. The 84th meeting of the UNECE Executive Committee (EXCOM) was opened by Ambassador Janis Karklins, Permanent Representative of Latvia and Vice-Chairperson of EXCOM. The Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, as a special informal segment under agenda item 2, was moderated by Ambassador Jan Kara, Permanent Representative of the Czech Republic.

Session 1: Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the UNECE region: first steps and challenges

7. The key results of a Regional Survey on Planning, Implementation, Follow-up and Review of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁵ carried out by UNECE and the Regional UN Development Group Team for Europe and Central Asia (ECA Regional UNDG) in late 2015/early 2016 were jointly presented by the UNECE Executive Secretary/ Chair Regional Coordination Mechanism Mr. Christian Friis Bach, and UNDP Assistant Administrator and Director Regional Bureau for Europe and the CIS/ Chair ECA R-UNDG Ms. Cihan Sultanoglu.

8. Some clear trends and patterns emerged from this survey, to which 38 out of 56 member States provided answers.

a) National efforts to implement Agenda 2030 seek to build on existing policy frameworks, updating or adapting existing strategies. This approach is also observed in countries where the UN is represented through UN Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams.

b) SDGs have an intersectoral character, and this is reflected in the extensive use of inter-ministerial coordination structures. Given the complexity of the new Agenda 2030, significant efforts will be required to identify areas of intervention, adapt the SDGs to national and local realities and ensure that the interlinkages between sectoral strategies and programmes are appropriately reflected in policy-making. Progress will depend on awareness on the content and implications of the 2030 Agenda – both within the government and beyond. All countries plan to involve stakeholders in the implementation of SDGs, including through particular institutional structures such as National Councils for Sustainable Development.

c) Providing norms, standards, legal instruments, policy recommendations and expert advice were mentioned as key services to be provided by the UN system. The degree of possible UN involvement in planning and implementation at the national level is quite varied.

d) Data quality, availability and disaggregation, monitoring systems, and statistical capacities, are areas of concern to governments. Data is essential for effective and transparent monitoring and this is an area where UN work, at different levels, is deemed particularly significant.

e) Responses from countries with UN presence show that there is strong political will and commitment to integrate the SDGs in current national development strategies, build on progress achieved within the framework of the MDGs, back up SDG implementation with high-level coordination mechanisms and ensure financial support. Nationalization of SDGs is already ongoing.

⁵ <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=42256>

f) Most countries with UN presence noted that no specific changes are envisaged in budgetary processes. Existing budgetary frameworks are expected to support the implementation of the nationalized SDGs, which will become fully integrated in national strategies, sectoral programmes and policies. However, the availability of the necessary resources to meet the SDGs remains an open question, which underlines the need for domestic resource mobilization and the development of partnerships.

g) The key framework for engagement of the UN system in countries with UN presence are the UN Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs), which are aligned with the SDGs. The relevance and usefulness of UNDAFs, which are a tangible outcome of the coordination work carried by the UN system, were recognized.

9. The insights gained in the Regional Survey are complemented by and fully aligned with the responses received from a needs assessment survey carried out by the ECA Regional UNDG among the UN Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams at the end of 2015⁶.

10. The important role of the private sector in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda was highlighted in a statement submitted by Ms. Carina Larsfalten, Managing Director, Global Policy and Strategic Partnerships, World Business Council for Sustainable Development, and presented by the moderator. It described an ongoing initiative to identify the business opportunities that the implementation of the SDGs opens for the private sector and to develop a comprehensive map of how business can contribute to the achievement of the SDGs. It was argued that it makes sense for the business sector to engage on sustainable development at a far more strategic level than it has been the case so far. There are new business models that can align profitability with social purpose and new financial tools that can crowd in private capital. But there are also responsibilities the business sector needs to embrace in areas crucial to public trust, such as tax, good jobs with fair wages, transparency, and accountability.

11. Reporting key messages from the pre-meeting with non-state actors and interested delegations, the moderator stated that civil society organizations were engaging at national and pan-European levels with governments on the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs. However, the impression gained by these organizations was that further work is required to more effectively address the integrated nature of the Agenda, which should be supported through the cooperation of all ministries and address both domestic and external aspects. There was a need to develop more interlinked structures that bring all relevant actors - governments as well as the UN system and civil society- together.

12. According to civil society organizations, they have not yet been invited to cooperate in the elaboration of national implementation strategies and plans in most countries. In their view, strong participatory processes are necessary to enable the public and civil society organizations alike to contribute to the design and implementation of the 2030 Agenda at all stages and to engage in a systematic way in monitoring, review and accountability processes. National Councils for Sustainable Development (NCSDs) should serve as important mechanisms for the coordination, monitoring and review of SDG implementation. Civil society organizations recognized the importance of the UN system in capacity-building, including on statistics, to support SDG implementation upon countries' requests.

⁶ Country-level needs for SDG implementation in Europe and Central Asia, https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/SDG-Needs-Assessment_RCs-and-UNCTs-2-December-2015-1.docx

13. Interventions by representatives of member States echoed and developed some of the key issues that appeared in the Regional Survey. A number of countries introduced their ongoing initiatives regarding SDG implementation. The overall approach is to refrain from the creation of new structures and processes, but rather embed the SDGs in the existing policy frameworks and mechanisms.

14. A significant emphasis was put on the need for broad stakeholder involvement at different stages – preparation and updating of strategies, adaptation of SDGs to local circumstances, monitoring and reporting. There was support for a transparent, inclusive, participatory process with broad multi-stakeholder participation. In particular, monitoring systems can be strengthened through greater public engagement in policy development and reporting on implementation. This wide involvement can be made possible through appropriate institutional structures and participatory mechanisms. In some countries, organizations are also encouraged to make specific commitments to support implementation.

15. The critical role of coordination was also remarked by various representatives of member States. As the Regional Survey noted, there is a need to involve different ministries, including those that may have not been traditionally concerned with sustainable development issues. Some countries mentioned the importance of having a “whole of government” approach, most often led at the highest political level, to appropriately address the interconnected nature of SDGs. Sectoral strategies need to appropriately reflect SDGs. It is also necessary to extend this coordination to the initiatives of different government levels – central, regional and local. All of them are called to play an important role in the implementation of SDGs.

16. Representatives from member States emphasized the importance of data for SDGs implementation. Appropriate assessments of the existing situation are required for the formulation of suitable policies that should be supported by good quality data to help with the understanding of needs and the monitoring of the impact of policies. Disaggregation is important to ensure that statistical averages do not mask inequalities. Data may come from different sources, so effective coordination is necessary. Statistical institutions may need to be strengthened in some countries and the quality of data improved. Some countries would welcome guidelines on common reporting that would facilitate fulfilling different obligations.

17. The indivisible nature of SDGs and the need to avoid giving excessive relevance to some goals was also remarked by some delegates. While some issues may receive particular policy attention, the definition of priorities should not lead to “cherry-picking” that creates distortions or fails to address the interlinkages between SDGs. There was also a recognition that some elements at the global level or within existing integration arrangements are still missing.

18. Following the interventions by governments, regional and other representatives of UN organizations reflected on questions that emerged in the Regional Survey and in interventions of member States: Reference was made to the significant challenges in collecting appropriate data, notably in the area of gender. Disaggregation down to the local level was considered important to ensure that nobody is left behind. Additional resources would be required to support these efforts, as current data gaps are very large. The importance of collaboration of all stakeholders was also evident from a sectoral perspective, for example, in agriculture. Partners for broader outreach activities could be found through sectoral work, for example in tourism. Issue-based coalitions should be established to engage multiple stakeholders and drive progress. Promoting inter-ministerial work would be a key element for success.

19. UN system entities highlighted existing strategic policy frameworks that already reflect the concerns of the SDGs and can be used to further their implementation, as it is the case in health or social justice. There were also mechanisms that allow for the involvement of the private sector, for example, regarding labour

issues. Overall, instruments and mechanisms available in the UN system in different areas, including human rights, gender and population, could be used to support implementation of the SDGs. Work under the mandates of international conferences, including analysis at the national level, could provide necessary and useful inputs for the implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda.

Session 2: Possible elements of a future regional follow-up and review mechanism for the 2030 Agenda

20. Mr. Bach, UNECE Executive Secretary, highlighted a number of key points from the Regional SDG Survey related to follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda. In their replies, governments underscored the need for a multi-layered follow-up and review architecture for the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs involving the national, regional and global levels. At the same time, member States emphasized that any possible future follow-up and review mechanism at the regional level must build on existing mechanisms and avoid duplications and additional reporting obligations. The mechanism should also integrate and promote cooperation among relevant actors.

21. Mr. Bach described basic features of a regional follow-up and review mechanism as part of a multi-layered architecture. The regional level would connect national reviews and monitoring on the one hand and the global HLPF on the other hand. The Regional Forum on Sustainable Development could be designed as a “docking station” that integrates existing review mechanisms as well as a range of different stakeholders.

22. In particular, a number of contributors and inputs could be integrated in a future Regional Forum. This could include reviews carried out by the eight UNECE Sectoral Committees and other UNECE inputs⁷ as well as reviews and inputs from the regional UN system, other regional and international organizations and civil society and other stakeholders.

23. Data is essential for effective and transparent monitoring. The recent session of the Conference of European Statisticians⁸ discussed extensively the work on statistics for SDGs and decided on a road map that charts the way forward for selecting regional indicators; clarifying the setup of reporting on SDGs; assessing the readiness of countries to report; identifying needs for capacity-building; and communicating and disseminating statistics.

24. Looking ahead, there are a number of issues that will require further discussion and clarification in building a regional follow-up and review platform. These include, in particular, the role of the European Union and other regional and international organizations (Eurasian Economic Union, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Council of Europe) and processes (e.g. Environment for Europe, Environment and Health Ministerial Conference, WHO Regional Committee for Europe, ILO European Regional Meeting, FAO Regional Conference for Europe and others) and of other stakeholders (civil society, private sector, universities).

25. In her introductory presentation, Ms. Cihan Sultanoglu, Chair of the Regional UNDG Team for Europe and Central Asia, emphasized that one of the key messages from the 2014 Regional Ministerial Consultation on Accountability for the Post-2015 Development Agenda⁹ was that any global and regional review

⁷ In particular Environmental Performance Reviews, Country Profiles on Housing and Land Management, Innovation Performance Reviews, Studies on Regulatory and Procedural Barriers to Trade, Road Maps for Mainstreaming Ageing, Global Assessments of National Statistical Systems and reviews and implementation mechanisms within legally binding conventions

⁸ [64th plenary session of the Conference of European Statisticians, 27-29 April 2016, Paris, France.](#)

⁹ [Regional Ministerial Consultation. Monitoring and Accountability for the Post-2015 Development Agenda. The Regional Dimension, 15-16 September 2014, Geneva.](#)

mechanism will be rooted in country-level review and reporting. Currently, monitoring and review was the most challenging area in SDG implementation, both with regard to the SDG indicators and their incorporation in national measurement frameworks. Even though the global SDG indicator framework had been endorsed by the UN Statistical Commission, challenges remained for further methodological work, as well as complexities of data collection at the global, regional and country levels.

26. Ms. Sultanoglu highlighted three major challenges at country level. Firstly, to ensure proper monitoring and data collection, countries would need support in either strengthening the existing monitoring systems or establishing new ones in order to respond to the SDG monitoring and reporting demands. The second challenge was data availability and quality, especially disaggregated by income, sex, age, ethnicity, migratory status, disability and geographic location or other characteristics to capture inequalities. There was a need for intensified, highly specialized and methodological support to national statistical institutions. Thirdly, extensive statistical capacity-building would also be required to support national counterparts in data development, collection and policy use for SDG implementation.

27. In connection with the adoption of the SDGs in September 2015, the role and the ‘fitness for purpose’ of the UN system in the implementation of the global sustainable development agenda had been the subject of intergovernmental discussions. Member States’ negotiations were ongoing in the framework of the second phase of the ECOSOC Dialogue on the Longer-Term Positioning of the UN Development System.

28. At the regional level, coordination and cooperation within the UN system had further intensified along with the formulation of the SDGs. Ms. Sultanoglu cited a Joint Positioning Paper by the Regional UN System in Europe and Central Asia¹⁰, the outcome of a joint retreat held in 2015 that stresses some main areas of inter-agency cooperation. In response to the SDGs, the regional UN system would strengthen joint analytical approaches through emphasizing interlinkages between social, development and environmental aspects of sustainable development, as well as advocating for building on successes in MDGs implementation and ensuring that current MDG gaps were acted upon within the SDG framework. It would also forge partnerships and intensify joint advocacy, by establishing issue-based coalitions and expanding UN engagement with various development partners. Promoting universality of the SDGs was another priority, especially focusing on the establishment of linkages between countries with UN presence and without. Eventually, capacity-building for monitoring, data and review was another important priority. It was planned to actively engage with national statistical offices to identify gaps and provide tailored support. UN internal cooperation would be strengthened by sharing information on and better connecting the available monitoring systems, data collection mechanisms and links to available data sets.

29. The third speaker, Ms. Leida Rijnhout, Director Global Policies and Sustainability, European Environmental Bureau (EEB) speaking on behalf of civil society, stressed that the participation of all civil society groups in SDG follow-up and review was important, notably the nine Major Groups and other stakeholders that are recognized in the global sustainable development process. She stated that civil society was concerned about a pushback in a number of countries that restrains civil society space. Civil society also was ready to be present at the various levels of the discussion and had important contributions to make to a regional follow-up and review mechanism, e.g. capacity-building, providing second/parallel track review, and contributing to peer reviews. However, adequate funding was needed for civil society to properly fulfil its role. She suggested the development of regional guidelines on civil society participation. Instruments such as the UNECE Aarhus Convention should be widely used to promote public participation. The region should act

¹⁰ Regional UN Development Group for Europe and Central Asia and Regional Coordination Mechanism, [Joint Positioning by the Regional UN System in Europe and Central Asia](#), 2016.

as an example in terms of inclusivity and make use of good practices that were applied, for instance, at UNEA and the HLPF. The speaker also introduced SDG Watch, an SDG-related platform of more than 70 civil society organizations, which is currently focused on the EU region and EU institutions.

30. A number of governments stressed that follow-up and review mechanisms at the global and regional levels are still under discussion. At the regional level, it was imperative to use existing follow-up and review mechanisms and platforms, to avoid any duplication of efforts and to minimize the need for additional resources.

31. Regarding the set-up of regional follow-up and review, some governments suggested that UNECE should act as a convener and should involve the entire regional UN system, including specialized agencies, according to the division of labour among UN entities. Relevant UN conferences and processes should also be considered. This would require that regional follow-up and review efforts are properly sequenced and synchronized with other existing reviews. UNECE should provide own inputs to regional follow-up and review according to its mandate. In addition, UNECE should seek coordination with other UN Regional Commissions.

32. Many governments highlighted the need to build an inclusive mechanism, involving stakeholders such as civil society, the private sector and non-UN organizations (e.g. OECD) in SDG follow-up and review. However, one delegation cautioned that the different roles of governments and other stakeholders needed to be respected.

33. Governments reaffirmed the view expressed in the Regional SDG Survey that the regional level could provide an added value in a number of areas. First and foremost, regional reviews could promote voluntary peer learning among groups and immediate neighbours that have similar challenges. UN regional actors could be facilitators of such a learning process. The results of the peer learning could also be made available globally. The role of a regional review forum could also be to discuss emerging regional issues, also in preparation of the HLPF, and to bring together relevant actors. Regional discussions could be held on the annual HLPF theme. Data and indicators should be covered as well as, in particular, trans-boundary issues, since the regional level provided a unique platform to address these questions. Moreover, the regional level could benefit from a certain focus on broader, cross-cutting themes, such as health, water or tourism, which would facilitate an integrated discussion across a number of SDGs.

34. UN system representatives stressed that there are numerous issues requiring cross-sectoral and inter-agency cooperation, such as resilience building, disaster risk reduction, health, decent work and environment. In these areas, multi-stakeholder approaches would be crucial to achieve progress.

35. Numerous existing follow-up and review mechanisms, platforms and processes were available within the regional as well as the broader Geneva-based UN system that could play an important role. This included, for instance, the European Forum for Disaster Risk Reduction, Universal Periodic Reviews that could contribute to strengthened sensitivity on human rights, and the ILO's European Regional Meeting taking place every four years (with the next meeting in October 2017).

Next steps and follow-up

36. The Executive Committee decided that the conclusions of the special informal segment of the eighty-fourth meeting of the UNECE Executive Committee, serving as the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, will be forwarded by the Chairperson as a contribution from the UNECE region to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in New York.

37. The Executive Committee furthermore agreed to continue, in line with the corresponding outcome of the 2016 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, the process of informal consultations on a future regional review mechanism for the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda at the regional level with a view to taking a decision on the establishment of such a mechanism at the sixty-seventh session of the Commission in April 2017.
